Greg Staats
Onenh dwa’ den’ dya
—Now Let us Proceed

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G44 Centre for Contemporary Photography
Onenh dwa’ den’dyā—Now Let us Proceed
Curated by Leila Timmins

As a teenager in the late 1970s, Greg Staats took a summer work program at the Woodland Indian Cultural and Educational Centre in Brantford, Ontario. Located in the former Mohawk Institute Residential School (1885–1970), the centre had opened with few changes to the original interior and little done to address the school’s long and traumatic history. It was there that Staats first learned photography, working in the darkroom that had been setup in one of the classrooms, and photographing the areas around his family home in Six Nations of the Grand River. When Staats moved to Toronto in the 80s, he brought these negatives with him and joined the collective of photographers working in the darkroom at Gallery 44. The constellation of new and archival images that make up this exhibition continue to document the areas around his family home, which in many ways can be understood as a return, not only to the place where Staats grew up but also to the places which shaped him as an image-maker. It was in these spaces that Staats was able to develop a practice outside of formal education, carefully and intentionally working from his on-reserve lived experience to embody and make visible a Hodinohso:ni worldview. For Staats, his image-making practice is defined by what he describes as a “restorative aesthetic,” building on the universal concepts and philosophical ideals of the Great Law of Peace, the binding agreement of the Iroquois Confederacy.

The title of this exhibition Onenh dwa’ den’dyā—Now Let us Proceed can be read as both an invitation to move forward and reminder of what should be left behind. It conjures a future placement at the Woodland Indian Cultural and Educational Council which crossed the Grand River at Chiefswood. Years later, the ferry was capsized and sank by a water truck bringing fresh water to areas of the reserve without adequate utilities. In this way the image of the ferry becomes a repository for the layers of history and social relations that accumulate on the site. Here place is neither timeless nor fixed, it has been made evident again throughout the exhibition in the images of burned buildings. In each photograph, all that remain of the homes are the charred wooden stud frames and small pieces of metal siding. For Staats, these arsons are a physical manifestation of the pain and generational trauma experienced making manifest the process of healing. A tall grove of white pines appear in an image taken outside Staats’ adolescent home, which were planted by Staats in his youth and now stand at full height. In another, pine branches have been bent into a rafters for an original longhouse structure, and in a third, the knotted base of a tree shows evidence of being cut or slashed building brownish wounds. Taken together, the transformation of these trees is a testament to resilience and collective growth. However, beyond a narrative of placemaking, the histories these images evince are complex.

Staats’ images are both a reminder of significant moments from his past and an invitation for dialogue to support a process of transformation and healing.

The photograph of a single oak tree in front of the Grand River marks a place just downstream from the mansion at Ruthven Park. Built by David Thompson, an entrepreneur and legislative representative for Haldimand from 1841–1845, the 158,000 acres were sold to the Grand River Navigation Company and government official, Thomas Fisher and are in the process of renewal and repair. Here the shallow depth of field and spectral quality of the image further suggest the veiling of the trauma and destruction caused by the profiteering ventures. However, in returning to this site, Staats learned that the wood is being harvested and sold by an Indigenous-owned salvage company, further embodying a process of renewal and repair.

The diptych NGC Vero’s House (2018) is perhaps the most direct criticism of the neglectful government policies and spending. On the left, the empty corner of a room at the National Gallery and on the right, the outside of the house owned by Vera, a neighbour of Staats as a child. The visible mould and decay on the outside of the house, which is made from insufficient materials, is contrasted against the image that Staats is learning to mediate it. Photography theorist Ariella Azoulay asserts that every photograph bears the trace of encounter between the photographer and the photographed, but does not belong to any one person or narrative. “The photograph is out there, an object in the world, and anyone (at least in principle), can pull it apart, hold it up, tear it down, examine it, meditate on it, and turn it around to see yet another shape.”¹ Taken this way, truth is no longer the responsibility of the photographer but instead, the image imposes an obligation on the viewer to address what it reveals about the shared conditions of our life.

If we take this obligation seriously, Staats’ images offer a generous process for renewal and healing. Implicating the viewer as witness, they invite us to readdress how we live and mediate it. Photography theorist Ariella Azoulay asserts that every photograph bears the trace of encounter between the photographer and the photographed, but does not belong to any one person or narrative. “The photograph is out there, an object in the world, and anyone (at least in principle), can pull it apart, hold it up, tear it down, examine it, meditate on it, and turn it around to see yet another shape.”¹ Taken this way, truth is no longer the responsibility of the photographer but instead, the image imposes an obligation on the viewer to address what it reveals about the shared conditions of our life.

¹ Elizabeth Ductaster, Art of Peace, Spirit & Sentiment, 2016. Pg. 49.
Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a charitable, non-profit, artist-run centre committed to supporting multi-faceted approaches to photography and lens-based media. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of artistic practice, Gallery 44’s mandate is to provide a context for meaningful reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography. Gallery 44 is committed to programs that reflect the continuously changing definition of photography by presenting a wide range of practices that engage timely and critical explorations of the medium. Through exhibitions, public engagement, education programs and production facilities our objective is to explore the artistic, cultural, historic, social and political implications of the image in our ever-expanding visual world.

Greg Staats Kanien’keh:ka (b. Ohsweken, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory) is a Toronto-based artist whose lens based and sculptural works combine language, mnemonics and the natural world as an ongoing process of conceptualising a Haudenosaunee restorative aesthetic that defines the multiplicity of relationships with trauma and renewal, performative burdens and the phenomena of condolence/renewal. Staats’ solo exhibitions include: McMaster Museum of Art, the Kitchener-Waterloo Arts Gallery, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff, Mercer Union, Gallery TPW, Trinity Square Video/Images festival. Group exhibitions: AGSM and and AGYU. Staats has been Faculty for 2 Aboriginal Residencies: Archive Restored (2009) and Towards Language (2010) at the Banff Centre.

Leila Timmins is a curator based in Toronto. She is currently the Curator and Manager, Exhibitions and Collections at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery and is a founding member of the EMILIA-AMALIA feminist working group.

Cover image
Greg Staats. What have you seen along the road, 2019

Greg Staats, Place 2, 2019

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